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# **The Syrian missile strike and the education of Donald J. Trump in the art of responsible statecraft**

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## **Abstract**

This article conducts a normative evaluation of the American missile strike on a Syrian airbase in April 2017 to assess whether it could be described as a responsible action. Marking a departure from President Trump's 'America First' approach, the missile attack was incessantly justified by administration officials using the terminologies of 'rights' and 'responsibilities.' The article utilises the theoretical propositions of the English School of International Relations to clarify the three benchmarks of a responsible action: acting legally, legitimately and prudently. A detailed examination of the official statements and the global political developments surrounding the strike suggests that although the action cannot be justified on the grounds of legality, it may still be described as responsible on the grounds of legitimacy and prudence. On its own, the strike can serve as an example of responsible statecraft, although these findings cannot be applied to the rest of President Trump's foreign policy.

**Keywords:** 'America First'; Donald Trump; Syria; Great power responsibility; International law; Legitimacy; Normative prudence

## **I. Introduction**

The cruise-missile strike conducted by US President Donald J. Trump on a Syrian airbase on 6 April 2017 surprised many. Even though the President had promised an 'unpredictable'<sup>1</sup> foreign policy during his Presidential campaign, very few expected that he would actually launch 59 missiles toward a Syrian airbase suspected to have been used for launching a chemical-gas attack on innocent civilians in the Khan Sheikoun area of north-western Syria.<sup>2</sup> At the start of President Trump's term in office, prominent observers declared that the world would witness a Jacksonian presidency 'not looking for opportunities for military interventions overseas' and not interested in 'grandiose plans for nation-building and global transformation.'<sup>3</sup> It appeared that the US would not be interested in being the world's policeman. Instead, it would pull up the drawbridge and focus on the problems at home. It was no wonder that the attack seemed to anger many voters who had purportedly voted for the

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Sullivan and Karen Tumulty, 'Trump promised an 'unpredictable' foreign policy. To allies, it looks incoherent,' *The Washington Post*, 11 April 2017.

<sup>2</sup> 'Syria chemical attack: What we know,' *BBC News*, 7 April 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Russell Mead, 'Donald Trump's Jacksonian Revolt,' *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 November 2016.

President's 'America First' stance that was to focus on tackling the problems at home rather than intervening in distant conflicts.<sup>4</sup>

However, pronouncements from the Administration's foreign policy team in the wake of the Syrian missile strike showed no aversion to being at the centre of the international society of states. In fact, the language showcased the officials' belief in the idea of an international society of states in which the members have certain rights and responsibilities. Furthermore, if a state did not fulfil its responsibilities, it could be censured, held accountable and even punished. For example, US Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley asserted at UN Security Council meeting on Syria held on 7 April:

Now, while the Syrian regime is responsible for the chemical weapons attack, it is not the only guilty party. The Iranian government bears a heavy responsibility. It has propped up and shielded Syria's brutal dictator for years. Iran continues to play a role in the bloodshed in Syria. The Russian government also bears considerable responsibility.<sup>5</sup>

Juxtaposing America's role in response to those played by Iran and Russia, Ambassador Haley was clear that the US would act according to its responsibilities as a great power even if Russia and Iran did not do the same. She stated that 'further delay by compromising with Russia for a watered down resolution would have only strengthened Assad. Strengthening Assad will only lead to more murders. We [are] not going to allow that.'<sup>6</sup> Hinting at what would be expected from Russia as a responsible great power, Ambassador Haley said 'the world is waiting for the Russian government to act responsibly in Syria. The world is waiting for Russia to reconsider its misplaced alliance with Bashar Assad.'<sup>7</sup>

Instead of signalling an America in retreat, commentators suggested that the missile attack sent signals to Damascus (as well as Pyongyang and Tehran)<sup>8</sup> that the United States was rooted within international society and was willing to use force to defend global peace.<sup>9</sup> The Secretary of Defense, Jim Mattis, went to great length to highlight that the US action was undertaken after due consideration of Syrian defiance of international law. Referring to the common code of the international society of states, Mattis asserted, 'The [US] National Security Council considered the near-century-old international prohibition against the use of chemical weapons, the Syrian regime's repeated violations of that international law, and the inexplicably ruthless murders the regime had committed.'<sup>10</sup> Referring to the norms of international society once again, Secretary Mattis asserted that in future, 'the Syrian regime should think long and hard before it again acts so recklessly in violation of international law against the use of

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<sup>4</sup> Edward Lozansky and Jim Jatras, 'A sudden Syrian stumbling block,' *The Washington Times*, 11 April 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Amb. Nikki Haley, Remarks at a UN Security Council Meeting on the Situation in Syria, New York City, 7 April 2017; Available at <https://usun.state.gov/remarks/7755>

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Yusuf Selman Inanc, 'Trump's missile attack aimed at both domestic, international audiences,' *Daily Sabah*, 9 April 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Jack Caravelli, 'U.S. missile strike on Syrian air base signals dramatic shift in Middle East policy,' *World Tribune*, 7 April 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Tim Hains, 'Defense Secretary Jim Mattis Press Conference On Syria, North Korea, Russia,' *Real Clear Politics*, 11 April 2017.

chemical weapons.’<sup>11</sup> Once again referring to the American responsibility in this instance, Secretary Mattis noted how the military action demonstrated that ‘the United States will not passively stand by while Assad blithely ignores international law and employs chemical weapons he had declared destroyed.’<sup>12</sup>

The references to states’ rights and responsibilities were even visible in language used by the administration when describing the Russian alliance with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Criticising Russia at the G-7 meeting in Lucca, Italy on 11 April 2017, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated: ‘It is ... clear Russia has failed to uphold the agreements that had been entered into under multiple UN Security Council resolutions. These agreements stipulated Russia as the guarantor of a Syria free of chemical weapons, that they would also locate, secure, and destroy all such armaments in Syria. Stockpiles and continued use demonstrate that Russia has failed in its responsibility to deliver on this 2013 commitment.’<sup>13</sup> Reminding Russia of its responsibilities as a great power, Secretary Tillerson said: ‘It is unclear whether Russia failed to take this obligation seriously or Russia has been incompetent, but this distinction doesn’t much matter to the dead. We can’t let this happen again.’<sup>14</sup>

Russia also came under attack during Tillerson’s comments delivered in an interview with CBS’s John Dickerson for not meeting its international commitments as a great power in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions. Tillerson said: ‘it’s clearly the message is Russia gave certain assurances under the chemical weapons agreement in 2013 and in accordance with the UN Security Council resolutions that they would be the guarantor of the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons stockpiles. Russia has failed in that commitment.’<sup>15</sup> He went on to assert that ‘[t]hey [the Russians] should have the greatest influence on him to cause him to no longer use those. I hope that Russia is thinking carefully about its continued alliance with Bashar al-Assad, because every time one of these horrific attacks occurs, it draws Russia closer in to some level of responsibility.’<sup>16</sup>

Given the primary and extremely significant focus on states’ rights and responsibilities, it is pertinent to ask whether the US missile strike was indeed conducted in accordance with the norms of responsible statecraft as implied by various administration officials. A clearer question can be: Could the American missile strike on the Syrian airbase be described as the action of a responsible great power? This article will answer that question. The next section will provide a brief background of the President’s views on Syria before entering the office and how the missile strike appeared to be a diversion from those views. The third section will outline a theoretical framework rooted in the propositions of the English School theory of International Relations. It will present a brief introduction of the idea of an

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Rex W. Tillerson, Secretary of State, Remarks at a Press Availability, Lucca Italy, 11 April 2017; Available at <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/04/269693.htm>

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Rex W. Tillerson, Secretary of State, Interview With John Dickerson of CBS Face the Nation, West Palm Beach, Florida, 9 April 2017; Available at <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/04/269632.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Rex W. Tillerson, Secretary of State, ‘Interview With George Stephanopoulos of ABC This Week,’ West Palm Beach, Florida, 9 April 2017; Available at <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/04/269631.htm>

international society at the heart of the English School. That is a society in which states have rights and responsibilities. But great powers, by virtue of their status, have additional rights and responsibilities in that society. Further engaging with the ideas of the English School approach, the fourth section will present specific yardsticks of legality, legitimacy and prudence that will help assess whether the American missile strike can be described as a responsible action. The fifth, sixth and seventh sections will apply each yardstick to the case of the US strike. The article asserts that though the strike may not be justified on the basis of legality, it can still be declared as a responsible action on the basis of the yardsticks of legitimacy and prudence. It also argues that the Syrian missile strike is one example of a responsible act on the part of the current administration. Where the lessons from it cannot be generalised for the rest of President Trump's foreign policy, it is also not possible to say that any other irresponsible, recent American actions nullify the normative significance of this one.

## II. Donald Trump, Syria and 'America First'

Many years before entering the White House, Donald Trump had repeatedly suggested the US should stay the 'hell out of Syria'.<sup>17</sup> He did not favour supporting 'the "rebels" [as they were] just as bad as the current regime.'<sup>18</sup> He asked 'WHAT WILL WE GET FOR OUR LIVES AND \$ BILLIONS? ZERO.'<sup>19</sup> After the 2013 chemical-weapons attack conducted by the government of Syria in a rebel-occupied area of Damascus, Trump warned his predecessor to not launch an attack against Syria. He tweeted: 'If Obama attacks Syria and innocent civilians are hurt and killed, he and the U.S. will look very bad!'<sup>20</sup> Not only did he caution President Obama against attacking Syria in response to the chemical attack, he specifically urged him to seek Congressional approval should he decide to. Once more, he asked, 'What will we get for bombing Syria besides more debt and a possible long term conflict? Obama needs Congressional approval' and 'he [the President] must get Congressional approval before attacking Syria – big mistake if he does not!'<sup>21</sup>

For Trump, President Obama was forgetting to fix the problems at home by focusing too much on international affairs. In September 2013, President Trump tweeted, '[t]he only reason President Obama wants to attack Syria is to save face over his very dumb RED LINE statement. Do NOT attack Syria, fix U.S.A.'<sup>22</sup> The stance of candidate Trump on Syria also remained unchanged throughout his presidential campaign, during which he attacked his opponent, Hillary Clinton, for her 'failing Syria policy.'<sup>23</sup>

Given this background, it is unsurprising that the American people, along with the rest of the world, saw the 6 April strike as an about-turn. President Trump not only launched the strike in response to the Syrian government's chemical-weapons attack on civilians, he did so without the Congressional approval that he so vehemently

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<sup>17</sup> Nicholas Fandos, 'Trump's View of Syria: How It Evolved, in 19 Tweets,' *The New York Times*, 7 April 2017.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

urged Obama to seek in the face of the same action. The strike was justified by the current US administration in the name of American national interest and was claimed to have strengthened US national security.<sup>24</sup> On the night of the strike, the President said in his statement, 'I ordered a targeted military strike on the airfield in Syria from where the chemical attack was launched. It is in this vital national security interest of the United States to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons.'<sup>25</sup> Where the attack angered many voters who voted for Trump's 'America First' stance,<sup>26</sup> Sean Spicer, former White House Press Secretary, went so far as to say that the strike was not neglecting the 'America First' policy, it was actually 'putting "America first."'<sup>27</sup> Spicer contended that American 'national security is the first and foremost reason that we have to act,' adding that the spread of chemical weapons was a 'clear danger to our country.'<sup>28</sup> As highlighted in the previous section, administration officials went to great lengths to discuss the episode in the language of rights and responsibilities. They were of the view that where the Syrian government and its allies did not stand up to their obligations, the United States will rise to its own duties as a responsible great power. The next section will study the notion of what it means to be a responsible great power in international society before proceeding to discuss whether the American action could be described as an example of responsible statecraft.

### III. The idea of 'great power responsibility' in international society

When an action is described as either responsible or irresponsible, the debate is cast in a normative realm because the very connotations of 'rights' and 'responsibilities' are normative concepts. Accordingly, this article employs the theoretical and normative framework provided by the English School of International Relations to construct a normative criterion concerning the issue of 'great power responsibility'. There are two reasons for selecting this theoretical approach in order to carry out this research: first, the English School approach has the scope to help conduct a normative analysis; and second, this approach stresses the additional responsibilities of great powers in international society. Where some proponents of the English School have conducted positivist study<sup>29</sup>, there are others who have provided scope for normative analysis.<sup>30</sup> The theory of Realism may answer some of the questions regarding great power responsibility from the national perspective but it cannot address them from the perspectives of those who believe in international society, international interest, international common good and international responsibilities of states – ideas frequently invoked and referred to by the members of the Trump Administration recently. The English School approach provides one with a set of ethics, regarding how things 'ought to be', from the unique perspective of international

<sup>24</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, 'Statement by President Trump on Syria,' *The White House*, 6 April 2017; Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/04/06/statement-president-trump-syria>

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Edward Lozansky and Jim Jatras, 'A sudden Syrian stumbling block,' *The Washington Times*, 11 April 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Emily Ngo, 'Spicer: Syria missile strike was putting 'America first,' *Newsday*, 10 April 2017.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Barry, Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Wheeler and Tim Dunne, 'Good international citizenship and a third way of British foreign policy,' *International Affairs*, 74 (4), 1998. pp. 847–870.

society. It is with the help of these ideals that one can evaluate the policies which have far-reaching repercussions.

The English School approach has the scope to perform the proposed normative analysis because it puts forward the idea that states form an international society. Hedley Bull has defined international society as a:

... group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another and share in the working of common institutions.<sup>31</sup>

The rights and responsibilities of states in this international society are defined by international laws, and they ensue from a state's membership of international society. The very idea of international society suggests a place where states have shared rules and norms.<sup>32</sup> Seen from this normative angle, this theory sets out international society's clear normative agenda as a starting point.

Furthermore, the English School is the only theoretical approach which addresses the fact that the great powers have some additional rights and responsibilities in international society by virtue of their status. Other major theories of IR – including Realism, Liberalism and Critical Theory – do not specifically concern themselves with the additional responsibilities of great powers in international society in this unique way.<sup>33</sup> For Neo-realists, the notion that power brings with it responsibilities does not carry much weight.<sup>34</sup> As Brown argues, to Neo-realists 'the idea that Great Powers have special responsibilities to international society as a whole makes little sense, because the notion of international society itself (as opposed to an international system) makes little sense.'<sup>35</sup> The English School approach, on the other hand, states that the major responsibility for the efficient working of international society lies with the great powers. Hence this approach has the potential to provide one with criteria to assess whether the American missile attack against Syria could be described as a responsible action undertaken by the US, a great power.

The English School of International Relations links three realities of IR: the international system, international society and world society.<sup>36</sup> The international system approach is similar to traditional ideas of neo-realism and examines the role which power plays in IR. World society is parallel to the mainstream cosmopolitanism which takes humankind as one community. International society occupies the middle ground between these two concepts. It talks about the 'shared interest and identity among states,' thereby putting the shared norms, rules and

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<sup>31</sup> Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> Dale Copeland, 'A realist critique of the English School' *Review of International Studies*, 29 (3), 2003, p. 427.

<sup>33</sup> Bull, 'The great irresponsibles? The United States, the Soviet Union, and World Order,' *International Journal*, 35(3), 1980, pp. 437-47. Richard Little, 'The balance of power and the great power management' In: Richard Little and John Williams, (eds.) *The Anarchical Society in a Globalized World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 97-120.

<sup>34</sup> Chris Brown, 'Do great powers have great responsibilities?' *Global Society*, 18 (1), 2004, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Barry Buzan, 'The English School: an underexploited resource in IR,' *Review of International Studies*, 27 (3), 2001, p. 471.

institutions at the centre of IR theory.<sup>37</sup> This concept has been the main focus of the English School research. Thus, according to the English School, when states pursue their national interest and balance the power of their adversaries (according to Neo-realist thinking), they also acknowledge the presence of an international society and a world society. In the English School perspective, the three elements have a 'continuous coexistence and interplay.'<sup>38</sup>

The international society of states focuses on the idea of the 'international common good'. This idea brings concepts like 'order' and 'justice' into the discussion. According to this approach, international order should not be taken for granted since it is a fragile achievement which could be destroyed by the policies of irresponsibly aggressive states.<sup>39</sup> This is the view which is usually stressed by the pluralist wing of international society. On the other hand, the solidarist wing of international society assumes that 'there is solidarity or potential solidarity in international society sufficient to enable enforcement of the law against the law-breakers.'<sup>40</sup> It stresses the potential among the society of states to reach an agreement to solve the problems that may go beyond the level of states, such as dealing with the problems of human rights.<sup>41</sup> The pluralist conception argues that 'states do not exhibit solidarity of this kind, but are capable of agreeing only for certain minimum purposes which fall short of that of the enforcement of law.'<sup>42</sup> According to pluralism, the minimum consensus achievable is on the issue of international order based on state sovereignty and non-intervention. Pluralism holds that the common international interest is limited to the maintenance of international order that could be achieved by upholding international law (based on the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention) and the balance of power. International law clarifies what is considered to be in the common good. Thus, all states have a stake in upholding international law. Furthermore, according to the pluralist wing of the international society approach of the English School, international order emerges as an example of a 'common good' in international society, the preservation of which is the responsibility of all members of this society, and the great powers in particular.

According to the proponents of the idea of an 'international society', the great powers have a different status in the realm of international politics from other states which do not possess such military, economic and political strength.<sup>43</sup> Great powers enjoy special rights and have special duties which they should perform to maintain their great power status and to contribute to the strength of international society. In other words, the great powers have responsibilities which relatively smaller members do not have to fulfil because it is due to their military and

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, p. 475.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, p. 476.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Linklater, 'The English School,' In: S Burchill et al., (eds.), *Theories of International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 105.

<sup>40</sup> Linklater and Suganami, *The English School*, p. 60; Hedley Bull, 'Grotian conception of international society,' In: Herbert Butterfield and Martin White, (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 52.

<sup>41</sup> John Vincent, *Human Rights and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>42</sup> Bull, 'Grotian conception of international society,' p. 52; Linklater and Suganami, *The English School of International Relations*, p. 60.

<sup>43</sup> Jackson, *The Global Covenant*, p. 173.



economic strength that the great powers have the ability to influence the lives of many people on the planet.<sup>44</sup> These very responsibilities give special rights to the great powers (one example of which is the possession of veto powers in the United Nations Security Council). The English School approach states that if a great power has the ability to influence the lives of so many people, then a major obligation of a great power is to act responsibly. In this way, the very idea of a 'great power' is presented as a normative concept.

The two wings of the international society approach – pluralism and solidarism – have different views regarding great power responsibility within international society. In this regard, pluralism holds that there exists a consensus across the society of states on the importance of international order as the greatest common good. Hence, according to this view, the preservation and maintenance of international order is the primary responsibility of great powers. In their justifications for the attack, the Trump administration officials frequently referred to the maintenance of international order as a justification for the attack. Pluralism is a relevant approach to conduct a normative assessment of this claim because it believes in great powers' responsibility to protect international order.

Hedley Bull, a major proponent of principles of pluralism, describes two primary roles for great powers. First, they contribute to interstate order by managing 'their own relations in an orderly manner', and second, they exploit their own 'dominant positions in relation to the rest of international society in such a way as to strengthen rather than weaken the society of states.'<sup>45</sup> The great powers could try to achieve these goals by adopting various strategies, including: the maintenance and preservation of balance of power, avoidance and control of crisis, and limitation of war but use of force if necessary – and such use of force should not be 'habitual and uninhibited but occasional and reluctant' but the great powers 'will rely upon instruments other than resorting to force.'<sup>46</sup> If a great power decides to use force, it will only do so in 'situations of extremity.'<sup>47</sup>

In his analysis of Bull's thinking, Dunne says that Bull invested in great powers the responsibility for managing the society of states and to act as guardians of international order.<sup>48</sup> Bull 'recognized that although the practice of great power responsibility is at variance with the principle of sovereign equality, such an affront to interstate justice is a necessary requirement for interstate order.'<sup>49</sup> That is why a great power may be justified in breaking international law, based on the principles of sovereign equality, to protect international order. However, 'the legitimacy of the institution of the great powers depends upon how far they can make their special privileges acceptable to others. In making their dominant position legitimate' and thus

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, p. 173.

<sup>45</sup> Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 207, see generally chapter 9; Nicholas Wheeler and Tim Dunne, 'Hedley Bull's pluralism of the intellect and solidarism of the will,' *International Affairs*, 72 (1), 1996, p. 96; Nicholas Wheeler, 'Guardian angel or global gangster: a review of the ethical claims of international society,' *Political Studies*, 44 (1), 1996, pp. 123–135.

<sup>46</sup> Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 207 and p. 215.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid*, p. 215.

<sup>48</sup> Tim Dunne, *Inventing international society: a history of the English School* (Hounsmill: Oxford, 1998), p. 147.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid*, p. 147, Wheeler and Dunne, 'Hedley Bull's pluralism of the intellect,' p. 96.

acceptable to international society, 'Bull argued, the great powers must accept their duties, which include the following: they should refrain from disorderly acts themselves' and 'they should co-opt aspiring secondary powers into the great power club.'<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, Bull believed that the 'desire for some minimum order in the international system is so powerful and universal that there is a certain disposition to accept an order that embodies the values of the existing great powers in preference to a breakdown of an order.'<sup>51</sup>

#### **IV. Legality, legitimacy and prudence as pillars of responsible statecraft**

The English School approach suggests the use of force by a great power is justified if there is a threat to greater international common good, defined in terms of international order. Pluralists believe that states within the international society uphold international law because it is in their interest to do so. Where pluralists acknowledge the importance of the Realist argument, they believe that international law is something which emerges in the form of a common good.<sup>52</sup> International law based on the principles of non-intervention and respect of each other's sovereignty is something in which all states have a stake.<sup>53</sup> Bull defined international law as one of the primary institutions of international society. It makes international society what it is because without properly defined norms serving as rules, international society would be indistinguishable from an international system.<sup>54</sup> In other words, by clarifying what is acceptable behaviour and what is unacceptable behaviour, international law helps mitigate the element of unpredictability from international politics and strengthens the foundations of international order in international society.<sup>55</sup> The great powers, given their status, have a responsibility to protect and uphold international law. As Simpson argued, international law helps 'legalise' the hegemony of the great powers.<sup>56</sup> In brief, acting legally is a major responsibility of any state in international society.

International law, however, has some limitations of its own and there may come a time when a great power is unable to act legally.<sup>57</sup> One of these is that, at times, states may view it as a hindrance towards international order rather than as a contribution to it.<sup>58</sup> For instance, referring to the British and French decision not to deride the Russian invasion of Finland in 1939 for being contrary to international law (because doing so could have destabilised the balance of power vis-à-vis Germany), Bull thinks that international law may be sacrificed if it is in the interest of longer-

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<sup>50</sup> Wheeler and Dunne, 'Hedley Bull's pluralism of the intellect,' p. 97; Dunne, *Inventing International Society*, p. 147.

<sup>51</sup> Bull, 'The great irresponsibles?' p. 439.

<sup>52</sup> Edward Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001). p. 164.

<sup>53</sup> Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 137.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid*, p. 140.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Wilson, The English School and the sociology of international law: strengths and limitations. Paper presented at the annual British International Studies Association Conference, 15–17 December 2003, Birmingham, United Kingdom, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Gerry Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States: Unequal Sovereigns in the International Legal Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 67.

<sup>57</sup> Bull, *The Anarchical society*, pp. 142–5.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid*, p. 143.

term order in international society.<sup>59</sup> In other words, a state can still act responsibly even if ignores the rules of international law.

As the great powers are meant to be the guardians of international order, they may be justified in ignoring international law in the case of a consensus regarding it being a hindrance towards the achievement of international order. It is because the role of the institutions of international society is to protect international order and eventually to preserve 'the system of states itself.'<sup>60</sup> Hence a state may disregard law when doing so involves the higher aim of protecting international order and international society.

A great power may claim that it has a legitimate reason to act to protect international order when it thinks that said order is under threat by one or more states. The great power may attempt to bring about a change that may be contrary to law:

... if there is overwhelming evidence of a consensus in international society as a whole in favour of change held to be just ... then change may take place without causing other than a local and temporary disorder after which the international order as a whole may emerge unscathed or even appear in a stronger position than before.<sup>61</sup>

Hence, an action that is not strictly legal may still be described as legitimate (and hence responsible) if it is conducted by garnering a consensus in international society. Clark has highlighted the importance of consensus for legitimacy.<sup>62</sup> He believes that 'consensus is important because it is the means by which society articulates its most basic purposes and values. Consensus is the benchmark of legitimacy in so far as it corresponds with these values.'<sup>63</sup> However, consensus is not the only benchmark of a legitimate action. Clark includes international norms such as morality and constitutionality – 'how affairs should be conducted' – to be in the realm of legitimacy as well.<sup>64</sup> In brief, an action would be legitimate if there existed a consensus among the members of the international society about it being in conformity with the principles of international society. In certain situations, a great power's actions may be illegal but they could still be legitimate and responsible. As Wheeler and Dunne argue that although there is a 'clear preference' for UN authorisation 'but in the absence of this [and]... in exceptional cases', the great powers have 'a duty to use force even if this weakens the rule of law in the society of states'.<sup>65</sup>

Along with acting according to the norms of legality and legitimacy, members of the international society, especially the great powers, are expected to discharge their responsibilities prudently. It has been argued that without prudence, 'political actors will be either thoughtlessly complacent, purely self-interested or inhuman, merely irrelevant to the ongoing life of their society, or the cause of mindless or groundlessly hopeful destruction or violence.'<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid*, p. 144.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*, p. 107.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid*, p. 95.

<sup>62</sup> Ian Clark, *Legitimacy in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*, p. 164.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, p. 220.

<sup>65</sup> Wheeler and Dunne, 'Good international citizenship,' p. 869.

<sup>66</sup> R. Nicholas and D. White, 'Politics proper: On action and prudence,' *Ethics*, 89 (4), 1979, p. 374.

The use of prudence is crucial in the decision-making process of the great powers.<sup>67</sup> Jackson identifies two dimensions of prudence: self-regarding prudence and other-regarding prudence.<sup>68</sup> Self-regarding prudence is ‘personal or egocentric prudence’ that ‘looks ahead and proceeds with caution in the anxiety that otherwise something unwelcome or something terrible might happen to me.’<sup>69</sup> Thus, when ‘the self is simply me personally and nobody else’, then this prudence would be instrumental prudence: that which is entirely self-regarding.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, if self includes ‘somebody else and becomes we and not just me alone – joint selves or a collective self – as it almost always does in the activities of politics and war, then prudence is no longer entirely self-regarding’ but becomes other-regarding, this can be described as normative prudence.<sup>71</sup> If the great powers pursue their selfish interests and call their actions ‘prudent’ then that, according to Jackson, would be instrumental prudence. On the other hand, if a great power acts to uphold the greater international interest (i.e. the interest of the international community) and is driven by the concerns of others, not only its own, then its actions would be justified through the lens of normative prudence. Hence Jackson argues that prudence becomes ‘a normative concept when it concerns others besides’ us; ‘it is a political virtue to take care not to harm others’ and a ‘cardinal virtue’ when it concerns politics and especially the great powers.<sup>72</sup> By using the principles of prudence, a great power can make difficult political decisions. Prudence, if employed, can help a great power understand the reality of the situation and imparts a degree of foresight to the decisions enabling it to foresee the consequences of its actions.<sup>73</sup> It will help this great power envisage the possible courses of action by helping it decide how to act in order to promote the common interest of society of states – which, with reference to the current case study, is ‘international order’.

## **V. Great-power responsibility and the legality of the Syria strike**

The previous two sections have stipulated the key yardsticks according to which the American missile strike will be assessed. The first step towards learning whether the US missile strike on the Syrian airbase could be described as a responsible action by a great power involves assessing its legality. As concerns the issue of legality, an act of this nature is considered to be legal if it is conducted on the basis of a Security Council authorisation under Chapter 7 or if it takes the form of self-defence (enshrined in Article 51).

The Security Council has been engaged with the Syrian war since its very beginning. In September 2013, it unanimously adopted Resolution 2118 which determined that ‘the use of chemical weapons anywhere constituted a threat to international peace and

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<sup>67</sup> Jackson, *The Global Covenant*, p. 153.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*, p. 153.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid*, p. 153.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid*, p. 153.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 153.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20 and p. 154.

security.’<sup>74</sup> The Resolution stated that ‘no party in Syria should use, develop, produce, acquire, stockpile, retain or transfer such weapons.’<sup>75</sup> Here a key question is: can we say that the missile strike of 6 April was conducted to enforce Resolution 2118 or to punish for its violation? The answer would be in the negative. The text of Resolution 2118 was specific in relaying that, in case of non-compliance, the Security Council would impose measures under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter.<sup>76</sup> Member states were not granted permission to resort to force in the absence of the Syrian compliance.

The US’s use of force can also not be labelled as legal on the basis of a right to self-defence. The Syrian government’s use of chemical weapons did not constitute an attack on the United States. The Trump administration also did not resort to the self-defence argument as a justification for the strike. The Department of Defense statement on the matter mentioned that the US strike was to ‘deter the regime from using chemical weapons again.’<sup>77</sup> The statement clarifies that it was a preemptive strike to deter the Syrian government from undertaking similar actions in the future. An attack would be legal according to Article 51 of the UN Charter if it had been conducted after an armed attack had occurred against the US; this was clearly not the case.<sup>78</sup>

Given that the American justifications centred on the harm suffered by innocent civilians in Syria, could the action be justified under the customary norm of responsibility to protect?<sup>79</sup> The controversial nature of the matter suggests that there was not unanimous support within the Security Council for the stance that the Syrian crisis required a military intervention. Given that situation, the missile strike could not be justified according to the accepted definition of responsibility to protect. Observers have indeed argued that ‘military intervention outside an authorization by the U.N. arguably violates U.N. prohibitions against unauthorized use of force.’<sup>80</sup> Robert Jackson, a famous American judge, argued that no matter how much one agrees with the grave humanitarian crisis, one also has a duty to not confuse ‘the issue of a power’s validity with the cause it is invoked to promote.’<sup>81</sup>

David Tafari, however, has a slightly different view concerning how the Syrian strike can be justified according to the spirit of R2P.<sup>82</sup> He believes that the spirit of the doctrine ‘stipulates that member states have an affirmative duty to prevent crimes against humanity even when the international community fails to satisfy its obligation.

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<sup>74</sup> Security Council Requires Scheduled Destruction of Syria’s Chemical Weapons, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2118 (2013), 27 September 2013; Available at <http://www.un.org/press/en/2013/sc11135.doc.htm>

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2118, p. 4.

<sup>77</sup> Statement from Pentagon Spokesman Capt. Jeff Davis on U.S. strike in Syria, Release No: NR-126-17, 6 April 2017.

<sup>78</sup> United Nations Charter, Chapter VII.

<sup>79</sup> David Tafari, ‘Why Trump’s attack on Syria is legal,’ *Politico*, 13 April 2017.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Jack Goldsmith, ‘The Constitutionality of the Syria Strike Through the Eyes of OLC (and the Obama Administration),’ *Lawfare Blog*, 7 April 2017; Available from <https://www.lawfareblog.com/constitutionality-syria-strike-through-eyes-olc-and-obama-administration>

<sup>82</sup> Tafari, ‘Why Trump’s attack on Syria is legal.’

In other words, member states are *obliged to take action when the Security Council doesn't*.<sup>83</sup> Though a number of scholars in the filed might not find it possible to justify the missile strike according to the norms of R2P, Tufari believed that it had a 'legitimate' legal basis.<sup>84</sup> He believes that Trump's claim urging us to 'act in recognition of the horrors suffered by Syria's children invokes the exact rationale underpinning R2P.'<sup>85</sup> These views might have some currency but the fact remains that if seen from the widely accepted definitions of R2P, the action cannot be described as legal.

After looking at international law, the next objective would be to assess the legality of the action from the perspective of US domestic law. As concerns this, it is commonly known that the US Congress is authorised to declare war. However, the United States War Powers Resolution does provide the President the possibility of short-term use of force in situations of hostilities. However, studying the American strikes against Syria, prominent American lawyers assert that the strike could not be justified as legal under the War Powers Resolution.<sup>86</sup> That is because the case did not constitute a situation of hostilities as the other side (the Syrian government) did not have the capability to retaliate and did not do so.<sup>87</sup>

The US has justified its airstrikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Yemen on the basis of the Authorisation for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) passed by US Congress in 2001.<sup>88</sup> The authorisation was granted to the President to attack Al-Qaeda and its associated forces.<sup>89</sup> However, the AUMF cannot be used to justify an attack on the Syrian government that is itself at war with al-Qaeda and its associated forces.<sup>90</sup>

The final justification for the use of force to be legal may come from Article II of the American Constitution. It authorises the President, as Commander-in-Chief, to use force in order to protect American national interest. President Trump also alluded to the national interest when informing the nation of the attack. He stated that it was in the 'vital national security interest of the United States to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons.'<sup>91</sup> According to Jack Goldsmith, this reasoning was in fact developed by the Obama Administration when contemplating the possibility of attacking Syria after it crossed 'red lines' by using chemical weapons in August 2013.<sup>92</sup>

According to Goldsmith, the Obama administration identified two areas in which the use of force could be justified through using the term 'national interest.'<sup>93</sup> The first one was the preservation of regional stability and the second was ensuring the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, emphasis added.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Alex Emmons, 'Legal experts question whether Trump's Syria strike was constitutional,' *The Intercept*, 7 April 2017.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ariane de Vogue, 'Was Trump's Syria strike legal? An expert weighs in,' *CNN*, 7 April 2017.

<sup>89</sup> See Public Law 107-40, 107<sup>th</sup> Congress, 18 September 2001; Available at <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-107publ40/pdf/PLAW-107publ40.pdf>

<sup>90</sup> de Vogue, 'Was Trump's Syria strike legal?'

<sup>91</sup> Press Secretary, 'Statement by President Trump on Syria'

<sup>92</sup> Goldsmith, 'The Constitutionality of the Syria Strike'

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

credibility and effectiveness of the United Nations Security Council. Where there might be a possibility to justify the use of force on the basis of the former, it is hard to do so on the basis of the latter. The Security Council is actively involved in the Syrian conflict and is fully able to decide whether it wanted to ensure its credibility and effectiveness by using force against the Syrian state. The use of force in the name of national interest for the preservation of regional stability, however, might have somewhat more credence. The President used that justification in his statement on the subject when he said that the Syrian ‘refugee crisis continues to deepen and the region continues to destabilize, threatening the United States and its allies.’<sup>94</sup> The problematic nature of that justification is obvious, as any possible instance of American use of force may be justified on these grounds. As Jack Goldsmith has also argued, such justifications ‘will *always* be present when the President is considering military intervention’ and ‘these interests provide no practical limitation on presidential power.’<sup>95</sup>

## VI. The questions of legitimacy

After noting that the legality of the missile strike is problematic, the discussion now moves towards studying it from the perspective of legitimacy. The framework outlined points towards a ‘consensus’ in international society as a benchmark of legitimacy. The current case demonstrates that the US action commanded substantial international consensus. Russia and its allies (Iran and Syria), on the other hand, clearly seemed to be outside the consensus.

There was unusually high level of support in favour of the strike from almost all corners of the world. Shortly after it occurred, France and Germany issued a joint statement welcoming the strike. They asserted that the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, bore full responsibility for the attack.<sup>96</sup> The French President at that time Francois Hollande said that the strike was exactly what France wanted to do after the 2013 chemical attack, but was unable to proceed due to the reluctance of President Obama and the then-British Prime Minister.<sup>97</sup>

The President of the European Council contended that the strikes were a signal not just of American but also Western resolve against chemical attacks.<sup>98</sup> His statement mentioned that the missile launches showed ‘needed resolve against barbaric chemical attacks,’ arguing that the ‘EU will work with the U.S. to end brutality in Syria.’<sup>99</sup>

The attack took place as the Chinese President Xi Jinping was visiting the United States and was President Trump’s guest at his private estate in Palm Beach, Florida. Donald Trump apparently mentioned the attack to the Chinese President over dinner.

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<sup>94</sup> Press Secretary, ‘Statement by President Trump on Syria’

<sup>95</sup> Goldsmith, ‘The Constitutionality of the Syria Strike,’ italics in original.

<sup>96</sup> Chiara Palazzo and Peter Foster, ‘Assad bears full responsibility’: how the world reacted to Donald Trump’s missile strike on Syria,’ *The Telegraph*, 7 April 2017.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Gabriela Baczynska, ‘U.S. strikes in Syria show resolve against chemical attacks: EU’s Tusk,’ *Reuters*, 7 April 2017.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*

Xi Jinping is reported to have ‘understood the US reaction given the deaths of children’<sup>100</sup> and seen it as a ‘punishment’ for killing children.<sup>101</sup>

A day after the attack, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying stopped short of directly criticising the US and simply called for calm and restraint.<sup>102</sup> This comes with the backdrop in which China has mostly sided with Russia regarding the Syrian crisis to the frustration of various Western capitals. Arguably, it would have been clearly too difficult for China to stay out of a clear consensus that emerged in the international community regarding the nature of the chemical attack.

The Turkish President hailed the strike as a ‘positive step’ and said that the US could have done more to cause a greater damage to the ability of the Syrian President to inflict harm on his own people.<sup>103</sup> The British government ‘fully’ supported the strikes and felt that the American response to the chemical attacks was wholly appropriate.<sup>104</sup> Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also supported the American action claiming that his government was informed an hour before the attack by the US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis.<sup>105</sup>

The government of Israel praised President Trump’s resolve and expressed hope that the message sent by the US would resonate not only in Damascus, but in Tehran, Pyongyang and elsewhere.<sup>106</sup> The Australian government praised the swift and just response of the United States.<sup>107</sup> The Saudi government declared it to be a ‘courageous decision’ by the United States.<sup>108</sup> *The New York Times* noted that only a handful of countries opposed the American action (including Bolivia, Iran, Russia and, of course, Syria).<sup>109</sup>

On 12 April 2017, a draft resolution supported by the United States, Britain and France was put forward for voting at the Security Council. The resolution condemned the use of chemical weapons in Syria and it called on the Syrian government to cooperate in investigating the attack. The resolution was supported by ten out of fifteen members of the Security Council with China, Ethiopia and Kazakhstan abstaining. Only two members, Russia and Bolivia, voted against the resolution.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Hariet Alexander and Roland Oliphant, ‘US strikes on Syria: Xi Jinping told Donald Trump he understood the US response ‘because of the death of children’,’ *The Telegraph*, 7 April 2017.

<sup>101</sup> Jane Perlez, ‘After Xi Leaves U.S., Chinese Media Assail Strike on Syria,’ *The New York Times*, 8 April 2017.

<sup>102</sup> Sutirtho Patranobis, ‘China calls for calm after US missile strikes, asks for UN probe into Syria chemical attack,’ *Hindustan Times*, 7 April 2017.

<sup>103</sup> Metin Gurcan, ‘How Turkey’s ‘hasty’ support for US missile strike could backfire,’ *AL Monitor*, 10 April 2017.

<sup>104</sup> ‘UK government ‘fully supports’ US air strike in Syria,’ *BBC News*, 7 April 2017.

<sup>105</sup> Peter Zimonjic and John Tasker, ‘Canada was briefed on and ‘fully supports’ U.S. missile strikes against Syria: PM,’ *CBC News*, 7 April 2017.

<sup>106</sup> ‘Sunni Arab states and Israel welcome US strikes on Syria air base,’ *Financial Times*, 7 April 2017.

<sup>107</sup> Chiara Palazzo and Peter Foster, ‘Assad bears full responsibility’: how the world reacted to Donald Trump’s missile strike on Syria,’ *The Telegraph*, 7 April 2017.

<sup>108</sup> Gregor Aisch, Yonett Joseph and Anjali Singhvi, ‘Which countries support and which oppose the U.S. missile strikes in Syria’ *The New York Times*, 9 April 2017

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Russia blocks Security Council action on reported use of chemical weapons in Syria’s Khan Shaykhun, UN News Centre, Available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=56554#.WO95EPnyvIU>



The Russian veto came as no surprise, as Russia used its veto for the eighth time in the six-year history of the Syrian war.<sup>111</sup> The Chinese abstention, however, was out of the ordinary as China had used its veto six times since the war in Syria began. Significantly, the Russian diplomats came to the session with a rival draft resolution expressing concern at the American attack and included a condemnation of the strike.<sup>112</sup> However, that resolution was not put to a vote. This was unsurprising because the resolution would not have gained much support given the overwhelming support for the American-supported resolution.

Capturing the mood of the international community, US Ambassador Nikki Haley stated that there was a consensus in the international community supporting the American action and Russia, Iran and Hizbollah were isolated as the only supporters of the Syrian regime's cruelties.<sup>113</sup> Pointing to the consensus in favour of acting against Assad, she said

People not just in the West, but across the Middle East and the world, are speaking out against Assad's brutality. It is long past time for Russia to stop covering for Assad. It is long past time for Russia to push seriously for peace and not continue to be part of the problem.<sup>114</sup>

The US was clearly claiming legitimacy for its action on the basis of the consensus present in support of the missile strike in the international community. The parallels with the Kosovo Conflict of 1999 are quite stark here. This Russian veto in the case of Syria is reminiscent of the time when it refused to act against the Serbian aggression, leading NATO to intervene to stop the atrocities against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. The Russian stance at that time was dubbed to be illegitimate and its vote was described as an 'unreasonable veto.'<sup>115</sup>

It has been asserted that a consensus regarding the use of force existed in the case of Kosovo at the Security Council and Russia halted action accordingly. There was no UN resolution to authorise NATO's action, and it was believed to be contrary to international law.<sup>116</sup> However a majority of states in the Security Council were in favour of acting against Serbia, and it was only because of an 'unreasonable' Russian veto that a UN resolution could not be passed to authorise force in that instance. A consensus held at the Security Council to do something to help the victims of Serbian aggression. Hence the report of the Independent International Commission on Kosovo

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<sup>111</sup> Michelle Nichols, 'Russia blocks U.N. Security Council condemnation of Syria attack,' *Reuters*, 13 April 2017. Interestingly, commentators had already said that the previous Russian vetoes in the case of Syria had reduced its 'international standing and contributed to its growing isolation.' See Denis Corboy, William Courtney and Kenneth Yalowitz, 'Russia's veto diplomacy,' *The New York Times*, 14 August 2012.

<sup>112</sup> Michelle Nichols, 'Russia vetoes UN resolution on Syria attack, China abstains,' *AOL*, 12 April 2017.

<sup>113</sup> Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Situation in Syria, Amb. Nikki Haley, New York, 12 April 2017, Available at <https://usun.state.gov/remarks/7762>

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Jason Ralph, *Tony Blair's 'New Doctrine of International Community' and the UK Decision to Invade Iraq*, School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, Working Paper No. 20, (August 2005), p. 19

<sup>116</sup> Independent International Commission on Kosovo, *Kosovo Report: Conflict, International Response, Lessons Learned*, Oxford University Press; New York, 2001, p. 4.

concluded that intervention in Kosovo was ‘illegal but legitimate.’<sup>117</sup> It was illegal because there was no UN authorisation behind the action, but legitimate nonetheless because there existed a consensus among the majority of member states to act.

This claim regarding a presence of a consensus in NATO’s favour could be further substantiated by the fact that a draft resolution circulated by Belarus, Russia and India demanding a cessation of the use of force by NATO in Kosovo was defeated by a vote of 12-3.<sup>118</sup> In opposing the resolution, the representatives of the Canadian government argued that a support for the draft resolution would place states ‘outside the international consensus, which holds that the time has come to stop the continuing violence.’<sup>119</sup> The same sentiment might explain the Chinese reluctance to vote against the recent resolution against Syria. For China, the cost of staying outside the consensus outweighed the cost of abstaining.

The Japanese case regarding Syria was also similar. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe supported the strike and stressed that ‘the Japanese government supports the U.S. government’s determination never to tolerate the further spread and use of chemical weapons.’<sup>120</sup> Highlighting the link with international order and peace, Abe noted that Japan highly valued ‘the strong commitment of President Trump to maintenance of the international order and peace and stability of allies and the world.’<sup>121</sup> However, relevant Japanese voices at home expressed worry that the stance might jeopardise relations with Russia, especially as, at the time, the former was interested in the latter’s concessions over Hokkaido islands disputed by Tokyo and Moscow since the end of World War II. Japan decided to side with the international consensus despite potential negative repercussions.

Comparing the case of Kosovo with Syria highlights that the Russian use of veto did isolate it, as pointed out by Ambassador Haley:

The United States takes no pleasure in seeing Russia isolated again on the Security Council ... this vote could have been the moment when Russia saw that its interests do not lie with a murderous dictator, but rather with the many countries in the international community, including those across the Middle East, that want to end this conflict. By its failure, Russia will continue to be isolated. We urge Russia to join forces with the overwhelming number of countries that are pushing for a political solution. The international community has spoken. Russia now has a lot to prove.<sup>122</sup>

In the Security Council meetings held on the matter, the US went to great lengths to point out that the Syrian government had ‘no friends in the world,’ clearly

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<sup>117</sup> *The Kosovo Report*, p. 4.

<sup>118</sup> United Nations Security Council Document S/1999/328 of 26 March 1999.

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in Wheeler, ‘Reflections on the legality,’ p. 156.

<sup>120</sup> Reji Yoshida, ‘Abe backs U.S. missile strike on Syria but might draw backlash from Putin,’ *The Japan Times*, 7 April 2017.

<sup>121</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Explanation of Vote on a Draft UN Security Council Resolution on Chemical Weapons in Syria, Amb. Nikki Haley, New York, 12 April 2017; Available at <https://usun.state.gov/remarks/7764>

highlighting its isolation.<sup>123</sup> The US also warned the Security Council to not stand outside the international consensus for the fear that it might be rendered irrelevant. It said:

This Council needs to be serious about peace in Syria too. Month after month, we all repeat the same points in this chamber. We all say there is no military solution to this conflict, but look at what actually happens on the ground. This Council's relevance depends on taking action to condemn those responsible for violence and to hold them accountable for defying this Council's demands. This Council should not just say it's for a political solution but also actively pressure the parties to prove it. That means adopting resolutions that say what we mean – resolutions that we are all willing to uphold.<sup>124</sup>

## VII. The Syria strike and prudent statecraft

The previous section highlighted how the American missile strike can be described as responsible due to its conformity with the norms of legitimacy. This section will assess the attack according to the principles of prudence outlined above. The ideas put forward in the fourth section stipulated that politicians often describe their action as prudent. However, the principles of the English School approach would assert that the use of this term is only appropriate if done so in a 'normative' sense.<sup>125</sup> In this sense, it alludes to 'other-interested behaviour' as 'we presumably do not want prudent aggressors or prudent rapists.'<sup>126</sup>

The rhetoric of the Trump presidential campaign was very much centred on the notion of 'America First.' It was feared that an isolationist America governed by President Trump might do away with the key pillars, which had ensured a semblance of global peace since the Second World War. That sentiment was particularly pronounced in President Trump's inaugural speech in which he said:

For many decades, we've ... subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military; we've defended other nation's borders while refusing to defend our own; and spent trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay.<sup>127</sup>

However, the administration's pronouncements with reference to the case of Syria seemed to suggest that the Trump administration was very interested in engaging with the international community. Furthermore (and as highlighted above), it repeatedly referred to the norms of the international society to criticise the actions of the Syrian government and its allies as well as to justify the American missile strike.

The statements by the administration officials went to great lengths to assert that the strike not only benefited American national interest, it also served as punishment for

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<sup>123</sup> Explanation of Vote on a Draft UN Security Council Resolution on Chemical Weapons in Syria, Amb. Nikki Haley, New York, 12 April 2017; Available at <https://usun.state.gov/remarks/7764>

<sup>124</sup> Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Situation in Syria, Amb. Nikki Haley, New York, 12 April 2017, Available at <https://usun.state.gov/remarks/7762>

<sup>125</sup> Jackson, *The Global Covenant*, p. 153.

<sup>126</sup> Ken Booth, 'Military Intervention: Duty and Prudent,' in Lawrence Freedman, (ed.), *Military Intervention in European Conflicts* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 58.

<sup>127</sup> 'Inaugural address: Trump's full speech,' *CNN*, 21 January 2017.

the Syrian use of chemical weapons against innocent civilians, particularly children (an example of ‘other-interested behaviour’).<sup>128</sup> One key intention behind the missile strike was to caution the Syrian government against any future uses of chemical weapons against civilians.<sup>129</sup> The American action seemed to strengthen the norm of humanitarian intervention when the suffering of innocent civilians might cross a certain threshold. Specifically, it appeared to strengthen the taboo against the use of chemical weapons and helped in the cause of declaring their use as a ‘symbol of “uncivilised” conduct in international relations.’<sup>130</sup> Supporting this viewpoint, Secretary Tillerson stated on the day of the strikes:

It’s important to recognize that as Assad has continued to use chemical weapons in these attacks with no response – no response from the international community – that he, in effect, is normalizing the use of chemical weapons, which may then be adopted by others. So it’s important that some action be taken on behalf of the international community to make clear that the use of chemical weapons continues to be a violation of international norms.<sup>131</sup>

Secretary Tillerson went on to say:

The President is willing to take decisive action when called for. And I think in this particular case, the use of prohibited chemical weapons, which violates a number of international norms and violates existing agreements, called for this type of a response, which is a kinetic military response.<sup>132</sup>

The statements appeared to be the evidence of the Trump administration’s wish to put a stop to the use of chemical weapons as they violated cherished norms of international society. Where the missile strikes might be unjustifiable through the standards of legality, they can be declared as actions of responsible statecraft on the basis of the norms of legitimacy as well as the principles of prudence.

US relations with Russia provide a useful case to study the Trump administration’s willingness to think beyond the scope of its own interests. During the presidential campaign, Trump aides were often being declared to be too close to the Russian establishment. President Trump also asserted that ‘If Putin like[d] Donald Trump, guess what folks, that’s called an asset, not a liability.’<sup>133</sup> However, the administration seemed to be willing to risk damaging its ties with Russia in order to act against the Syrian government. Predictably, US-Russia relations were intensely strained after the

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<sup>128</sup> For example, see Office of the Press Secretary, ‘Statement by President Trump on Syria,’ *The White House*, 6 April 2017; Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/04/06/statement-president-trump-syria>

<sup>129</sup> Spencer Ackerman and Julian Borger, ‘Syria: US warns Assad over using chemical weapons again,’ *The Guardian*, 8 April 2017.

<sup>130</sup> Richard Price, ‘A genealogy of the chemical weapons taboo,’ *International Organization*, 49(1), 1995, pp. 73-103.

<sup>131</sup> Rex W. Tillerson, Secretary of State, Remarks with National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, Palm Beach, Florida, 6 April 2017; Available at <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/04/269543.htm>

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> Justin Carissimo, ‘Donald Trump: If Vladimir Putin likes me, it’s an asset,’ *Independent*, 11 January 2017.

missile attack in Syria. Just a week after the strike, President Trump himself acknowledged that the ties between the two countries 'may be at all-time low.'<sup>134</sup>

Here it is essential to acknowledge that the singular case being studied here does not mean that the lessons learnt from it can be generalised to the rest of the US foreign policy under President Trump. However, this particular incident does suggest that the US appeared to be socialised into the norms of prudent statecraft (though it may have been a temporary effect). The statements by various administration officials in the introduction of this article would lead us to believe that this socialisation (albeit momentary) is not merely a result of the 'emulating process of competitive behaviours imposed by an anarchic international system,'<sup>135</sup> as Kenneth Waltz's neorealist logic would dictate. Instead, it results from a conscious calculation that has come with certain costs at home.<sup>136</sup> The primary cost of the United States expending its energies and precious resources on a foreign conflict might be seen as a 'betrayal'<sup>137</sup> by those who voted for him in the name of 'America First.' If the administration officials did not regard the course of acting as a responsible great power in the case of Syria as an *appropriate* one to adopt, it would appear that they would not have taken this path, given the quite obvious and major repercussions at home.

Though the foreign policy of the Trump administration will be a topic of discussion in the years to come, the missile strike on Syria appeared to be an instance when the US elected to abide by the rules of the international society which strengthen its common foundation. This appears to be an example of the United States displaying an 'other-interested behaviour' according to the theoretical principles highlighted above. In other words, the incident shows how Trump's America displayed an interest in being prudent in a way that is beneficial for the wider international community and not just the United States alone.

## VIII. Conclusion

It is too early to assess the foreign policy of the Trump administration. In this situation, it is possible to study it on a case-by-case basis. That is what the current contribution has endeavoured to do with reference to the case of the American missile strike against Syria in April 2017. It has done so by assessing it according to the norms of responsible statecraft. The article has argued that although the legality of the action might not be clear, the strike can still be described as a responsible action according to the norms of legitimacy and principles of prudence.

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<sup>134</sup> Julian Borger and Alec Luhn, 'Donald Trump says US relations with Russia 'may be at all-time low',<sup>134</sup> *The Guardian*, 13 April 2017.

<sup>135</sup> Pu Xiaoyu, 'Socialisation as a Two-way Process: Emerging Powers and the Diffusion of International Norms,' *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 5(4), 2012, p. 345.

<sup>136</sup> Jeffrey Checkel, 'International Institutions and Socialization in Europe: Introduction and Framework,' *International Organization*, 59(4), 2005, p. 804.

<sup>137</sup> David Smith, 'As Trump plays the global strongman, what happened to 'America first',<sup>137</sup> *The Guardian*, 16 April 2017.

It is safe to suggest that there exist ‘mixed views’ on the Trump presidency and the President does not enjoy much popularity in the wider world.<sup>138</sup> His rhetoric<sup>139</sup> and Twitter outbursts<sup>140</sup> evoke strong criticisms the world over. As far the contours of the actual foreign policy are concerned, we have to wait and see as it begins to unfold in the coming years. Given the strong views concerning the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, it is pertinent that a study assessing a significant event like the Syrian missile strike does so on its own merits. A researcher tasked with the objective of answering the question of whether the Syrian missile strike could be described as an action of a responsible great power incorporating the English School approach would undoubtedly reach the same conclusions as this writing.

We cannot deny the significance of a responsible action in one domain due to the leadership’s irresponsible rhetoric and actions at other fronts. Similarly, the pronouncements with regard to the normative evaluations here cannot be generalised across the entirety of President Trump’s foreign policy.

This article has employed the theoretical principles of the English School to assess the Syrian missile strike. It has concluded that, on balance, the Syrian missile strike could be described as an example of responsible statecraft. A couple of qualifications regarding the theory are necessary. First, the theory is merely a tool helping us to answer the research question and to undertake the enquiry. It cannot be used to justify the American bombing of Syria, or of any other country for that matter. In other words, the English School theory helped us analyse the dynamics of legality, legitimacy and prudence in international society. These dynamics cannot be explored through another theoretical approach. The purpose of the theory is to clarify a framework consisting of three yardsticks, which are then employed to study the case of the Syrian missile strike. Second, President Trump’s pronouncements and some of his actions (such as instituting a travel ban on the citizens of certain countries from entering the United States) pose a challenge to English School theory that has the subject of ‘great power management’ of international society as one of its central tenets. A legitimate question can be asked: what happens if the great powers ignore the constraining norms of the international society?<sup>141</sup> That is a fair question and can be explored in other contributions. The current work has limited itself to critically assessing just one instance from the contemporary American foreign policy and the theoretical principles of the English School have been operationalised for that purpose. It is hoped that future research will take up the matter of great powers’ ignoring the norms of the international society and what that means for the broader questions concerning the solidity of the English School as a viable approach.

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<sup>138</sup> Richard Wike et al., ‘U.S. image suffers as publics around world question Trump’s leadership,’ Pew Research Center, 26 June 2017; Available at <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/06/26/u-s-image-suffers-as-publics-around-world-question-trumps-leadership/>

<sup>139</sup> David Denby, ‘The plot against America: Donald Trump’s rhetoric,’ *The New Yorker*, 15 December 2015; Sam Leith, ‘Trump’s rhetoric: A triumph of inarticulacy,’ *The Guardian*, 13 January 2017.

<sup>140</sup> Max Greenwood, ‘Trump team tries to control Twitter outbursts: report,’ *The Hill*, 23 June 2017.

<sup>141</sup> The author is grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this article for this point.